



Beef



Whether making the perfect Sunday roast, the juiciest steak or the meatiest lasagne, beef holds a special place with cooks and consumers alike for its deep flavours and rich textures.

Buyer's guide

Mike Robinson shows you how to make sure your beef is the best you can buy.

When and where to buy

Beef is available all year round. The choice at supermarkets has improved, but usually you'll have to settle for what's on the shelf or at the meat counter (if there is one). Following the BSE ('mad cow disease') crisis in Britain stringent controls were brought into place in beef production and certain products were banned. With the decline of BSE in British herds, most traditional cuts of beef are once again available. However, there are now restrictions on the age of animals from which meat can come for certain products (such as T-bone steaks).



Butchers are likely to stock a greater variety of cuts than most supermarkets and should be able to give advice on preparing and cooking, and tell you where, and from which breeds, their meat came from - as should producers at farmers' markets. This sort of detail is also often available from mail-order companies specialising in meat.

For organically-raised beef - or beef from breeds noted for succulent meat, such as Aberdeen Angus - you should be prepared to pay more. Regardless, buying the best quality beef you can afford is always worthwhile.

Tips on buying

Colour is often cited as a means of determining quality of beef but can't be used as the main indicator of quality. For example, meat that has been matured traditionally - hung and exposed to the air after slaughter for up to several weeks, or 'dry-aged' - will tend to be deep burgundy in colour with creamy, yellowish fat and will develop a more concentrated, complex flavour as it ages. The ageing process, if done correctly, can increase the tenderness of meat. The characteristics of aged meat are highly rated by chefs, traditional butchers and many consumers.



On the other hand, meat that has been vacuum-packed shortly after slaughter will retain a bright red appearance with white fat for a much longer time. This meat can still be tender but may lack the complexity of flavour of traditionally dry-aged beef. Most of the meat sold in supermarkets will be vacuum-packed and is seldom dry-aged for any length of time. Some supermarkets are now selling dry-aged beef which is clearly labelled as such.

A good butcher will be able to tell you not only how and how long your beef has been aged for, but will also be

able to tell you about its provenance.

Brown colouring indicates the meat has been open to the air for some time and shouldn't be taken as an indication of quality. Look for beef that's firm to the touch. Avoid wet, slimy meat and meat with a greenish-grey tinge and an 'off' smell. Always check the 'use by' dates on pre-packed meat.

Many people prefer beef that's 'marbled' (flecked throughout) with fat. Marbled meat is considered to be more flavoursome and tender because the fat lubricates the meat during cooking and adds another layer of flavour. However leaner meat needn't be lacking in flavour if cooked properly.

Organic beef

To many consumers, the provenance of the beef on their plate has become crucially important since the BSE crisis, and there's been an accompanying increase in demand for organic beef and beef from grass-fed herds. So what distinguishes organic beef from the rest?

For a start, an organic beef system allows cattle to graze pasture for most of their lives. Feed must meet organic standards and 60 per cent of the ration must comprise roughage such as grazed grass and clover or conserved fodder such as silage. These feeds are produced without the use of agrochemicals. No artificial growth promoters can be used, and antibiotics for preventative purposes are banned. Animal health and welfare is managed with minimal use of veterinary medicines, concentrating on providing good housing and grazing conditions for the cattle.



Grass-fed and free-range beef

Many excellent beef producers choose not to get organic certification. Sometimes, this is because of the expense and inconvenience involved in ensuring that all the pasture on which the herd grazes has received organic certification.

Grass-reared beef comes from cattle that graze on grass during the spring and summer and on a range of diets including hay or silage in the winter months, following an extensive or free-range farming system (though there are no exact legal definitions for 'grass-reared' or 'free-range' beef). Dairy-cross cattle may be harder to fatten on such a system, so before slaughter they usually undergo a more intensive feeding process (fed indoors on concentrates - which may include genetically modified soya). Producers at farmers' markets are usually happy to explain which system they follow.



Grass-based systems are prevalent in Britain because of the wide availability of grass. Some research suggests that grass-fed beef has higher levels of omega-3 and is therefore 'healthier' than intensively-reared meat. Some consumers and chefs find the flavour of grass-fed beef preferable.

At the same time, farmers following modern methods argue that consumer demand is for leaner beef. Traditionally reared, grass-fed beef tends to have a richer, more complex flavour with a degree of marbling (fat in the meat), which contributes to a fuller flavour when the meat is cooked.

British breeds

Britain has many old and native breeds of farm livestock, a high proportion of which are deemed endangered, such has been the relentless decline in their numbers. The reason for this decline is simple; other breeds have been found to be more productive on many beef farms and better suited to modern farming methods.

Fortunately, there are some British farmers who've made a firm commitment to



rare-breed animals, rearing them slowly on traceable feed, with space to range and be active. They slaughter them at an older age, locally if possible, then hang the meat to mature on the bone.

The traditional British beef breeds are hardy animals, able to withstand harsh winters. They grow at a slower rate than dairy-cross herds or many continental breeds (some of which have been selected for fast efficient growth of lean, tender beef) and tend to put on fat reserves both under the skin and within the muscle. The resulting meat is well-marbled with fat and has a close-grained texture and (if correctly hung) great depth of flavour.

Aberdeen Angus is a well known breed used in quality beef systems across Britain, but there are dozens of other breeds native to Britain or established for centuries. Native breeds include the Welsh Black, Highland, Lincoln Red, South Devon and Sussex as well as the Aberdeen Angus and Hereford. Rare British breeds cover the Irish Moiled, Beef Shorthorn, Belted and Black Galloways, Red Poll, White Park, British White, Longhorn, Gloucester and Dexter. They also include the 'Traditional' Aberdeen Angus, Hereford and Lincoln Red, the old-fashioned animals whose extended pedigrees show no infusion of foreign genes.

[For more information on the rare breeds and butchers who stock their meat go to the Rare Breeds Survival Trust website.](#)

Storing and freezing

Always store meat in the coldest part of the fridge. Ensure that the fridge maintains a temperature below 4 degrees Celsius (inexpensive thermometers can be bought for this purpose). If the meat is in a cling-filmed tray, leave it in the packaging until ready for use. If not, put the meat on a plate, loosely wrap in greaseproof paper or foil, and store in the fridge away from cooked meats. Never let the meat or its juices come into contact with other foods in the fridge, particularly ready-to-eat foods.



Beef will keep for up to five days in the fridge, depending on how fresh it is when you buy it. Mince and offal are best eaten within two days. Vacuum-packed meat will normally last even longer but check the use-by date to be sure.

Quickly freezing beef reduces the chance of damage to the texture or succulence of the meat. Use frozen beef within six months. Defrost, loosely wrapped, in the fridge allowing five hours per 450g (1lb).

If you've cooked beef for eating later, cool it as quickly as possible (ideally within one to two hours), cover and refrigerate and eat within two days. Do not place hot into the fridge, which would risk raising the temperature of other foods that need to be kept cold.

Roasting beef

Succulent roast beef with Yorkshire pudding and proper gravy - nothing could be more British. The larger the joint, the better it is for roasting. Choose a joint from the back, ribs, fillet or sirloin. Traditional roasting cuts are the forerib (known as rib of beef) or sirloin. Leaving in the bone adds flavour, and bone is a good conductor of heat so the meat cooks evenly, but a boned and rolled cut is easier to carve.



Roasting guidelines for topside, rib, sirloin and silverside

A 2.5kg/5½lb joint of beef on the bone (or 1.5kg/3lb 5oz boned and rolled joint) will feed six people generously.

Preheat the oven to 190C/375F/Gas 5. For an extra flavoursome roast sear the beef in a hot pan for about 10

minutes before roasting (if you don't sear it first then add an extra 10 minutes to the following cooking times).
Roast for the following times:

Rare: 11 minutes per 450g/1lb Medium: 14 minutes per 450g/1lb Well done: 16 minutes per 450g/1lb

To be sure your meat is cooked you can use a meat thermometer. There are two varieties available - one you insert in the thickest part of the raw joint and cook until the desired internal temperature is reached. The other is inserted into the cooked joint after roasting.

Recommended temperatures for beef are: Rare 60C; medium 70C; well done 80C

Baste the meat with the juices at least three times during cooking. When it's done, take out the meat and leave it to rest for at least 20 minutes. This enables the joint to re-absorb the delicious juices that have bubbled up and makes it easier to carve. Serve with roast potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, seasonal vegetables and gravy, with horseradish and mustard on the side.

Other methods of cooking beef



Pot-roasting and braising

Brisket, thick flank, topside and silverside are all good cuts for braising or pot-roasting. The meat is usually dusted with flour and fried first to brown it, then placed on vegetables and herbs; stock is poured in to cover the meat. It's then cooked on a gentle heat in the oven with the lid on. The meat and vegetable juices combine to make a delicious sauce.

Stewing or casseroling

This method of cooking is best for cheaper cuts that need long, gentle cooking such as shin and leg, brisket, chuck and blade, neck and clod and skirt. Many supermarkets sell packets of "stewing steak" that's likely to originate from the tougher cuts and which need longer cooking than cubes of "braising steak".

Grilling, barbecuing or pan-frying

These are all fast methods of cooking - ideal for steaks (rump, sirloin and fillet). Rump and fillet are suited to stir-frying and should be cut into long, even strips. Stir-fried beef is the basis of many Chinese recipes including beef in oyster sauce.

Accompaniments

Autumnal vegetables go well with beef - potatoes obviously, but also celeriac, parsnip, artichoke and fennel - particularly when braised alongside the meat. Unlike other roasts, beef isn't served with jams and jellies, just simple horseradish sauce or mustard.

Green vegetables are delicious stir-fried with beef; use a mixture of broccoli, sugar-snap peas, beans and pak choi. Veal goes well with citrusy flavours, so experiment with herbs such as lemon thyme, citrus sauces and oriental flavours such as ginger and lemongrass.

Watercress, rocket and spinach also make good accompaniments. Cold roast beef is delicious eaten with fruit pickles or mustards, or try roast beef sandwiches with a little horseradish cream or mustard.

Recipes

[Roast beef with Yorkshires by Mike Robinson \(video recipe\)](#)

[Beef and ale stew with dumplings by Mike Robinson \(video recipe\)](#)

[Sirloin steak with chunky chips by Paul Merrett \(video recipe\)](#)

[Braised shin of beef by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall](#)

